

FEMINISTIC APPROACH OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL IN HER NOVELS: A CRITICAL STUDY

ASHOK SINGH¹ & DR. MUKESH SHARMA²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Jiwaji University, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India

²Professor, Department of English, Veerangana Jhalkaari Baai Govt Girls College Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

Nayantara Sahgal is a socio-feminist with a tremendous realisation of prevailing social and political conditions. Her meaning of feminism is completely based on Indian ethos. She attacks the age old notion of discrimination on the account of sexuality. Search for identity is her major concern. Her fictions are preoccupied with modern Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. Man-woman relationship is a prominent theme of Sahgal's fictions. In this paper, we will try to highlight the feminist approach of Nayantara Sahgal in her selected novels that is A Time to Be Happy, Storm in Chandigarh, The Day in Shadow and A Situation in New Delhi.

KEYWORDS: Socio-Feminist, Self-Realisation, Discrimination, Search for Sexual Freedom, Man-Woman Relationship, Unhappy Experiences of Married Life, Male Chauvinism, Gross Injustice to Women, Exploitation, Maltreatment, Patriarchal Society, Emancipation & Self-Awareness

Received: Aug 21, 2021; **Accepted:** Sep 11, 2021; **Published:** Sep 22, 2021; **Paper Id.:** IJELDEC202116

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a social movement that seeks equal rights for women. Widespread concern for women's rights dates from the Enlightenment (European intellectual movement of the 17th to 18th century). Its first important expression was Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792). The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, New York, convened by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and others called for full legal equality with men, including full educational opportunity and equal compensation; thereafter the woman suffrage movement began in the 18th century). From America, the movement spread to Europe. American women gained the right to vote by constitutional amendment in 1920, but their participation in the workplace remained limited, and prevailing notions tended to confine women to the home. Milestones in the rise of modern feminism included a French writer and feminist Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex' (1949) and Betty Friedan's 'The Feminine Mystique' (1963) and the founding in 1966 of the National Organisation for Women.

Nayantara Sahgal is one such prominent Indian English novelist who has tried to redefine the traditional woman through her novels. The emergence of women novelists in Indian English literature took place as early as the last quarter of the 19th century. But it was only after the achievement of Independence that women novelists could make solid contributions in Indian English fiction. Nayantara Sahgal is one of the distinguished women novelists of the contemporary scene. She enjoys the reputation of being a political novelist. Her work has a strong realistic base and reflects not only her personal value but also the changing values of a society exposed for the first time to both freedom and power. But her fiction is equally concerned with the problems of women in contemporary society. Her fiction is coloured by her personal experiences and, therefore, has a strong autobiographical basis. Her

initiation into the values of humanism, love and freedom, her unconventional love marriage, clash of egos and subsequent divorce all has gone into her fiction. She, therefore, articulates her feminine sensibility and aspirations through her women characters.

Nayantara was the daughter of Vijaya Laxmi Pandit and the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru. Her westernised upbringing and higher studies in America also had an impact on her emotional and mental makeup. Later on, her love for and marriage with Gautam Sahgal resulted in traumatic experience. This marriage unsettled her although it was not an arranged marriage and was of her own choice. A man's ego and ambition, I learned, must be served first...¹ Along with the political theme, her fiction is also preoccupied with the modern Indian search for sexual freedom and self-woman's realization. With these political themes is often combined theme of man-woman relationship, their marital problems, their temperamental incompatibility, the problems arising out of their ego or submissiveness, and finally the problem of the place of women in society. A feminist concern too can be seen in her novels where her women characters are victims of conventional Indian society.

Nayantara Sahgal's first novel was *A Time to Be Happy*, set against a rural background in post-independence, rural India. The story is steeped in Gandhian thought which entails that India may be considered progressive and prosperous only if the same is reflected in its villages. Set in the village of Saharapur (a village in Uttar Pradesh), which for some strange reason the author refers to as Sharanpur. The story is set in the backdrop of an agricultural livelihood and talks on issues such as the *zamindari* (hereditary land ownership) system, the *mansabdari* (ranking of government officials) system and the *ryotwari* (land revenue collection) system. According to R. A. Singh (1994), Nayantara Sahgal's agrarian set up may be summed as follows:

In her first novel A Time To Be Happy, it is the narrator, who fills in the background information of the characters for he has either known them for many years, or they confide in him. (Singh, p. 63)

The novel comprises several characters from varied walks of life, with some being social, some political, some industrialists, some Congressmen, some in support of the British Raj, some dwelling in the past and some as visionaries of a futuristic India. Sahgal sums up her own novel as:

A Time To Be Happy is a story about people of the upper middle class in the India that was struggling for, achieving, and then testing independence—on one level it is a charming, intimate family chronicle, on another, it is a comedy of manners, acted out against an exotic background beautifully evoked. (A Time to Be Happy, Back cover)

The title of the novel reflects the socio-political dream that Indians had been dreaming of for quite some time. In 1857, the First War of independence brought hopes that that was 'a time to be happy'. However, Indians realized that they could do so only by ousting the British. So when the freedom fighters fought for independence and gained it, Indians perceived that now was 'the time to be happy'. Nevertheless, even after independence, their dreams haven't unfurled, with many, especially farmers, being portrayed as being in search of that elusive 'time to be happy'.

The narrator as well as the protagonist of the novel is Sanad. It is from his perspective that the story unfolds showing a stark demarcation between the industrialists and the Gandhian agrarians of post-independent India. Sanad's understanding of this contrast is revealed as follows:

The movement, far from being a purely political one, was a great social organization, too, a channel whereby even the least political-minded could help to alleviate the awe-inspiring distress of the poor of our land, I myself was never

of a political turn of mind, or I might not be sitting here 39 today in my solitary cottage, spending my hours among my books and papers, instead of seeking office in government or joining one of the numerous official and semi-official organizations that have sprung up since Independence. I worked as long as youth and health permitted, and now I am content to enjoy my leisure. I do not consider this selfish. I have earned my rest. (A Time To Be Happy, pp. 6–7)

Sanad is the embodiment of an individual with contrasting visions. His town, Sharanpur, is a small textile mill town. He works at Selkirk and Lowe, but wants to resign from his post, which is disapproved by his family. His family considers his stand to be impractical. The town is remote enough to not display any English influences. The whole story unfolds as *dramatis personae*. The female characters in Sanad's family are a mixture of varied outlooks. The women in his household display orthodox Hindu social thoughts and beliefs. This is shown in contrast to the women of Shivpal's family. Govind Narayan Shivpal is a wealthy landowner of Lucknow. His mother, referred to as Ammaji, is an elderly, domineering woman. The difference in their thoughts may be described as follows:

The characters are divided into two clear cut compartments—those that, brought up in the old, traditionally conservative mould are suspicious of all change, refusing to be swept off, and unaffected by the tumult of ideas all around, and those who find no escape from some kind of immediate adjustment with the new pattern of living, slowly evolving and replacing the old. In the first order fall Govind Narayan, his wife Laxmi, his brothers, Harish and Girish, Deoki, Madan Sahai, the narrator's own father etc. and the new are the home spun Sahai children, Govind Narayan's own son, Sanad, etc. (Asnani, pp. 40–41)

Thus, Nayantara Sahgal's pen has managed to depict Sharanpur as a village that would pioneer the development of a state. It sums by Gandhi's ideology that 'state is an assemblage of numerous villages' and 'villages are the places where India throb'.

Her next novel *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) is the statement on the need to redefine virtue and morals. The protagonist shows first time that women have a right to live as they wish to. Saroj and Meera are the important female characters in the novel. Saroj is the wife of Inder, who is a typical male chauvinist who believes women should have no reason to complain about their freedom. Saroj is tortured by her husband for pre-marital affair of hers. He treats her merely as wife in orthodox tradition. As a result, she developed a relationship with Vishal but it never reach its satisfied culmination. Inder's world is a world different from that of Saroj. Though he himself had several experiences with Mara, wife of Jit. Infact, Saroj is a forlorn soul with Inder as he makes her believe that she is unclean and pervert. On the other hand, Vishal tells her that true partnership consists in accepting an individual as a whole with all his or her shortcomings. Saroj finally succeeds in shaking off and breaking free from her marriage because it was choking her. She throws away the burden of bondage and feels free. Her final departure from Inder's home symbolized her breaking off from the sense of guilt which Inder had infused in her. Here we can observe that if Saroj search for selfhood takes her away from home, Mara instinct for self realisation and self-determination brings her back to its folds. Though Jit gives no reason for complaint his passivity frustrates her deeply while Inder's aggressiveness fills her with life. But when Jit tries to amend their relationship she comes back to him realizing truly and finally that Jit is the perfect partner in her journey to the discovery herself.

Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* exposes the grief-stricken experience of a divorced middle-aged woman, Simrit's marriage to Som, an industrialist, turns out to be a tragedy. This novel fictionalizes Sahgal's own experience post her divorce. She visualizes what she missed in real life. Simrit is immature and unprepared to face the challenges of life as

her adolescent years were with her 'scholarly' father and 'unworldly mother', who were too pre-occupied in their own worlds and failed to have any influence on their daughter. Simrit's mother was an orthodox Brahmin who kept to herself. She would withdraw into her shell on any untoward incident and, therefore, failed to give Simrit a larger realistic perspective on life.

The Day in Shadow sensitively recollects the suffering of woman in married life and the scorn that she is subjected to when she is determined to end a seventeen-year-old marriage. The stigma around a divorced woman is well portrayed and Sahgal describes how society considers divorce to be:

a disease that left pock marks. (The Day in Shadow, p. 4)

After living together for many years, Simrit finds it difficult to accept the idea of living alone. Sahgal shows how women tend to be afraid of breaking habits. Though society tags her as 'happily' married, she finds no intellectual or emotional satisfaction. Som never pays her attention and Simrit wrongly chooses to get frequently pregnant to satisfy and gain attention. Though Som was transformed to become afraid and beautifully unsure with each pregnancy, this attitude did not last for long. After the baby came, he would go back to his usual egoistic self, but Simrit enjoyed it while it lasted.

She never told him she felt reckless, not fragile during these months. (The Day in Shadow, p. 25)

Som principle in life was:

Be tough. Be winner. (The Day in Shadow, p. 69)

That was his adage – no question of sentiments and feelings. He displays the same attitude with his wife. He has no understanding of the finer sentiments such as affection, compassion, empathy and attachment. He only has business acumen, and emotions are beyond his realm. Som is not capable of reciprocating Simrit's expectations. He bullies her mentally and physically. However, Simrit fails to obey his every whim, which is a blow to his male ego. This redoubles his malicious intent, and he pours his retaliation on Simrit.

Simrit finds Som to be aloof and finds no security in the relationship as they share no empathy, understanding and especially friendship. Som never discussed his business with Simrit, considering women to be morons. He only objectified her as a sexual object.

Sahgal iterates that talk plays a major role in a relationship. Though Simrit tries to engage Som in any meaningful dialogue, she is disregarded like a piece of furniture. Som only uses her for physical comfort. Marriage, therefore, becomes solitary imprisonment instead of a communion. Som's failure lies in his cruel nature and thoughtlessness. Som is the typical male ego which is arrogant, sensual and lacks refinement. His only goals in life are success and money:

Simrit looked at Som during those days not always recognizing him. He had German phrases on the tip of his tongue and Vetter's mannerisms. He did most of his personal shopping in Europe. In a royal blue jacket, a French silk tie and handstitched Roman leather shoes he even looked foreign. (The Days in Shadow, p. 9)

It is the traditional upbringing of Som that makes him believe that a woman must be under the control of a man. He dislikes women's independence and liberty and is a firm believer in male domination. He presumes his wife to obey his model of submissive womanhood. Simrit is dissatisfied with the inequality of their relationship, but Som considers it to be the right order of things. Modern in other aspects, Som is a patriarchic male. Simrit finds no voice in any ordinary decision of everyday life:

Her usefulness to him had never extended to areas of the mind. (The Day in Shadow, p. 77).

Simrit's attempts to change him make Som furious. He states that he only wants a docile wife and if she cannot be one, she may end their marital relationship. Simrit though traditional breaks free of the mould and validates that individual freedom is most valuable, and no one must be permitted to compromise or suppress it.

Raj is everything contrary to Som. He strongly supports Simrit. The divorce terms dictated by Som are only meant to subject Simrit to further trouble. Raj cannot comprehend how an educated woman like Simrit could permit injustices to her. Simrit was tough because of her integrity and honesty. She had resolved to lead a dignified life without any assistance.

Raj was her pillar of strength. Simrit was stuck and maimed even after her divorce because of the settlement terms. Som like a typical male chooses to be cruel and revengeful, even after all the injustice that he had showered on Simrit. Som wanted to subject Simrit to a life sentence. Simrit was insecure with the deal and kept questioning herself if she were to blame. Sahgal designates her emotional state thus:

Som could have forgiven her if she had been a weaker being. Unsure, dependent, even deceiving. But beneath her docility she was none of these things was unpardonable. And she could have loved him in spite of everything if only sometimes she had fought him. (The Day of Shadow, p. 53)

Simrit found that she had nothing to give her children except herself. Simrit's divorce leads to difficulties not only in handling her own illogical fears and pressures but also with a society which does not identify a woman's individuality apart from her husband's. She is an:

over-loaded donkey [...] with its back breaking, and no one doing anything about it, not because they can't see it, but because it's a donkey and loads are for donkeys. (The Day in Shadow, p. 56)

Maybe she had always been an animal, only a nice, obedient, domestic one, sitting on a Cushion, doing as she was told. And in return, she had been fed and sheltered. (The Day in Shadow, p. 54)

In spite of some feminine opinions articulated by Raj now and then, his total conduct only strengthens the patriarchal myth of male chauvinism. Raj too is uncertain and indefinite in his attitude towards Simrit. He criticizes Simrit's every move as mediocre, defective and insignificant. He almost represses Simrit with his judicious supremacy. Language, which must be for communion, becomes a tool for patriarchal domination. The novel is a classic on woman's struggle against patriarchal authority and social edifice. Simrit acknowledges her weakness and admits her inexperience. Simrit is attracted to Raj only by his language, and regards all his statements as invaluable. Although Simrit is aware of the injustices wrought by man, she is a willing hostage of manipulation and inequality because of habit. Simrit blindly pays divine respect to Raj and a smile from him, as N. Shamota says:

radiated an atmosphere of suppressed jubilation that lapped around her in waves. (Shamota, 1966, pp. 106–107)

Loyal to Raj, Simrit thinks that "Raj had uncarved her," without realizing that Raj simply shaping her into the mould that he likes.

Nayantara Sahgal is deeply anxious regarding the basic requirement of freedom for women. Simrit in this novel wants to land on her own feet and appreciate independence, assertiveness and self-assurance. Simrit's desire for freedom and individuality compels her to file for divorce. She does want to be recognized as her husband's wife but by her own self. The novel represents the unpleasant creation of the male society. Thus, Sahgal presents a novel element to Indian English

fiction through the investigation of the disturbing emotional response – a characteristic new Indian spectacle.

CONCLUSIONS

A Time to be Happy (1958) aims to change the age-old norm of female bondage, which is extended by male hegemony. This attitude poignantly leads to the sidelining of women's social sphere of being. The novel discloses the threatening forces that create a crisis in a woman's life and are a threat to her identity. The novel not only reveals the hooliganism and chaos in educational institutions but also asserts that a woman has no place in a patriarchal set up. *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) pleads for an innovative marital morality based on shared trust, deliberation, openhandedness and nonexistence of pretence, selfishness and self-centeredness. It deals with multifaceted human relationships in which love, friendship, uprightness, freedom and fairness play a vivacious role. Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* depicts the tormented experience of a divorced middle-aged woman, Simrit. Her marriage with Som, an industrialist, turns out to be a catastrophe. The novel gives a profound account of the anguish of a woman in Indian society when she chooses to dissolve a seventeen-year-old marriage. A divorced woman is defamed forever and she is inquisitively watched by others. In *A Situation in New Delhi*, Sahgal has portrayed her male characters mostly as narrow-minded, merciless, careless husbands and their life is in desolation and boredom. However, some of her male characters correspondingly suffer in a wrong marriage, due to loneliness or lack of communication. Thus, Sahgal mainly focuses on women's sexual freedom and self-realization. As a woman novelist, Nayantara Sahgal is aware that her primary responsibility is that of encouraging the emancipation of women. She intensely describes how women are oppressed even during modern times by both individuals and society. She is deeply anxious about the failure of marital relationships, the solitude of living and private horrors. Her women characters grieve because they refuse to submerge their individuality and adhere to their personal identity at all costs.

REFERENCES

1. Asnani, S. M. (1973). *The novels of Nayantara Sahgal*. *Indian Literature*, XVI (1 & 2).
2. Sahgal, N. (1957). *Storm in Chandigarh*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
3. Sahgal, N. (2002 [1958]). *A time to be happy*. Mumbai: Jaico Publishing (first published by Alfred A. Knopf in New York).
4. Sahgal, N. (1971). *The day in shadow*. Delhi: Vikas Books.
5. Sahgal, N. (1977). *A situation in New Delhi*. London: Magazine Edition.
6. Shamota, N. (1966). *On artistic freedom* (pp. 106–107). Moscow: Progress Publishers.
7. Singh, R. A. (1994). *Novels of Nayantara Sahgal*, Bareilly: Prakash Books.
8. Barathi, S., and MI Babu. "Feminism in India: An Eastern Perspective." *International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL)* 9 (2019): 71-76.
9. Shekhawat, Anshu. "Gender within the Socio-Economic Matrix: A Critical Study of Usha Ganguli's *Rudali*." *International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL) ISSN (P)* (2016): 2249-6912.
10. Alou, Y. A. C. O. U. B. O. U. "The Narrative of Chaos in Post-Independence African Fiction: Towards the Demystification Of Violence in Chimamanda N. Adichie's "A Private Experience"." *International Journal of English and Literature* 9 (2019): 19-28.

11. Oberoi, Sonia Vashishta. "Indian Chick Lit: A Genre For Desi Girls." *International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL)* 7.2 (2017): 127-132.

